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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly reviews some of the circumstantial explanations for the unusual grip the report "A Nation At Risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) has had on the imagination of the U.S. public. Beyond these explanations, "A Nation At Risk" is a unique form of lament when it was published, not only did the political maneuvering of many parties bring the report to greater attention than reports on education normally receive, but the structure, rhetorical tone, and fervor of the report, with its suggestions of a nation fallen from grace, gripped the national soul as though it were a sermon. Years after its publication, "A Nation At Risk" remains a subject of commentary and study. As a genre, the Jeremiad foretells destruction because of the evil of a group. In addition, the "American Jeremiad" offers in addition the idea of catharsis and redemption through hard work, sacrifice, and rededication, focusing attention on the possible future in contrast to current failure. The report weaves together powerful strains of U.S. identity, including a fear of lost cohesion and the falling away from the mission of a chosen people. (SLD)

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"Hearken to the Sound of the Trumpet":

A Nation At Risk As An American Jeremiad

Paper Presentation at

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Writer's note: To keep the running text of the paper clean and in focus, I placed much substantiating information to footnotes.

Hearken To the Sound of the Trumpet : *A Nation At Risk* as an American Jeremiad

"...I set watchmen over you,
Saying, "Hearken to the sound of the trumpet."
But they said, "We will not hearken."
Therefore hear, ye nations...
Behold, I will bring evil upon this people,
Even the fruit of their thoughts,
Because they have not hearkened unto my words,
Nor to my law,
But rejected it."

JEREMIAH 6:17-19

The April, 1983 publication of *A Nation At Risk*, the National Commission on Excellence in Education's 36-page "open letter to the American people" was, for reasons sometimes inexplicable to those in the education field, one of the most important focusing events in recent American educational history.[1]

Although it burst upon the educational stage during a period of relative public quiescence and political inopportunity[2]—for instance, a member of the Commission's

[1] A focusing event, as many instinctively know, is a crisis or manufactured happening which brings to the attention of the public a problem which may have lain dormant in the collective political or cultural mind. Or as John W. Kingdon writes in Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies: "[Political] problems are often not self-evident...They need a little push to get the attention of people in and around government. That push is sometimes provided by a **focusing event** like a crisis or disaster that comes along to call attention to the problem..." (New York: Harpercollins, 1995), p. 94

[2] Gerald Horton [ANAR panelist] notes that "...a few months into the first triumphant year of Mr. Reagan's presidency [in 1981], there seemed to be little prospect for a substantial audience for a report on education. Except for occasional references to a gap between the achievements registered in schools in the U.S. and USSR, public interest in the subject was at a low ebb. The last two high points of public concern with education had come some time ago, in 1958, with President Eisenhower's National Defense Education Act, and in 1965, with President Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Education Act. ...The momentum in 1983 seemed to be going all the other way. Mr. Reagan had promised to abolish the Department of Education;

own panel noted that public interest in education was at a distinctly low ebb in the early 1980's--*A Nation At Risk* (*ANAR*) nonetheless provoked intense emotional reaction when it was first published, and is referred to, in and out of the educational literature, as among "the most significant documents in the history of American public education."[3]

Perceived by some as an important wake-up call, and by others as a sort of virulent strain of mad-cow virus spread through the populace, with depth charging force the report announced the failure of schools to deliver high levels of academic attainment to a vast number of its pupils. Called a "lightning rod as well as the rallying point" in uncountable summaries on the status of American education since its release, it has been identified as the central document which catalyzed "a movement to overhaul education to make it meet the demands of a modern-day market."[4] and political and cultural flashpoint which ushered us into a new era of school reform, with entirely new goals and emphases.[5]

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his administration had initiated cutbacks that augured a marked decrease in federal funding for education..." (Holton, Gerald, *"A Nation At Risk Revisited,"* *Daedalus*, Fall, 1984)

Echoing Holton's reflections, in his analysis of the report three years after its publication, Philip G. Altbach also notes that 1983 was not an apparently ripe moment for ground-breaking work in school reform. "In the 1970s, economic recession [turned]...public opinion against education just as demographic shifts meant that fewer young people were entering the schools. These elements proved a powerful combination for decline and the nation's schools barely managed to survive the decade [and did so] by cutting programmes, keeping teacher salaries steady and barely maintaining educational quality at levels established in the 1960s." (Altbach, Philip G., *"'A Nation at Risk': the educational reform debate in the United States"*, *Prospects*, No. 3, 1986, p. 340.

[3] The quote is from the *New York Times*, and is an evaluation of the report's significance five years after publication upon the death of Terrel Bell. (Fiske, Edward B., *"35 Pages That Shook the U.S. Education World,"* *New York Times*, April 27, 1988, B10)

[4] Obituary of Terrel H. Bell, *New York Times*, June 24, 1996, B8

[5] See, for instance, Patricia Albjerg Graham's historical analysts of the changing missions of public schools and the significance of *A Nation At Risk* . Graham argues that with *A Nation At Risk* the United States entered a new era of school reform in which the high achievement of all students has become to be the central mission of public schools. Moving out of a period in which equal *access* to schooling was a critical concern of educational leaders (the 1954 *Brown versus Board of Education*, Title 1 legislation, and other anti-discrimination suits marking this era), *A Nation At Risk* helped place the goal of academic excellence for all students, or world class academic standards by the year 2000, as a central mission of public schools--

Although criticized by major scholarly voices as "a shamefully poor document that was totally inadequate in its recommendations" (Mortimer Adler); as an "inadequate diagnosis of the problem" and a "terribly narrow vision of what American education might be" (Lawrence Cremin); and castigated for "exaggerated claims based on flimsy evidence"[6] (William Gardner, Dean of the College of Education at the University of Minnesota), the report galvanized reaction in a way no other document on education appears to have done subsequently.

The purpose of this paper is to very briefly review some of the circumstantial explanations for the report's unusual grip on the historical imagination, and to suggest that beyond these, *A Nation At Risk* is a unique form of American lament. Not only did the keen political maneuvering of many parties bring the report to far greater attention than documents on education normally receive, but the structure, rhetorical tone and fervor of the report--with its suggestions of an America fallen from grace--gripped the national soul in an archetypal sermon in the village square.

As we re-experience the "shame" of another TIMSS report (1997), which details the failure of our schools to compete at "highest global standards," or when a large portion of Massachusetts teachers receive failing grades on licensing exams and John Silber, the State School Board Chairman, thunders to cast out the underperformers,

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for the first time in American history. (Graham, Patricia Albjerg, "*Assimilation, Adjustment, and Access*," in Learning From the Past, Diane Ravitch and Maris A. Vinovskis, Editors (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

[6] William Gardner also complained of ANAR's "pontificat[ion] on matters about which there could scarcely be agreement, ...and [for] recommendations that either cost too much, could not be implemented or [were] too general to have any meaning"

viewed through the lens of *A Nation At Risk*, we may still be a nation searching for a way back to our divine path, back to our God-inspired mission.

In fact, it is the frequency and fervor of reaction to the report, five, ten and fifteen years after its publication, and the degree to which it appears to be an emotional crisis in the cyclical history of education, that *A Nation At Risk* emerged for me as having a power beyond the usual, accepted explanations for its influence.

Very briefly, a quick look at the immediate circumstances and reaction to the report when it was first released.

The Circumstances. Terrel Bell, Secretary of Education under Ronald Reagan from 1981 to 1985, organized the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which authored *A Nation At Risk*, to call attention to what he perceived as a portentous decline in American educational muscle power. Bell said:

> "I wanted to stage an event that would jar the people into action on behalf of their educational system." Bell recalls. "...We needed some means of rallying the American people around their schools and colleges. Educators also needed to be shaken out of their complacency. ...Since I could not realistically plan on another sputnik-type occurrence, I had to search for an alternative."[7]

Rhapsodically chronicled in other analyses of the report, the impact of *A Nation At Risk's* publication in 1983 was instantaneous and profound:

- Within a few hours of its release, the all three of the top three national television networks carried the report as a lead story;

[7] Bell, Terrel H., The Thirteenth Man: A Reagan Cabinet Memoir (New York: The Free Press, 1988), p. 115

- The report was featured on the front page of over 200 newspapers.
- Bell was, by his own description, an instant celebrity. "The next day I had invitations to appear on the highly visible early morning news shows." Although we now know this to be quite a common phenomenon, in 1983 in a relatively cooler media environment, this was unusual. Bell reported, "Requests came for me to appear the following Sunday on "Meet the Press" and "Face the Nation" ....Education was on everyone's front burner."[8]
- Ten months after the report had been published it was in its fifth printing and over 150,000 copies had been distributed. It was the U.S. Government Printing Office's fastest seller of all time.
- The American Association of School Administrators sent copies to its entire membership of 18,000.
- The *Congressional Record* and many daily newspapers across the country printed the 10,000 word report in its entirely.
- In the first three years after publication, a "conservative calculation is that the text of the report reached the hands of at least four million citizens"[9]

In The Years Following. Although it was only one analysis of education in a Year of Reports,[10] *A Nation At Risk's* influence shows little sign of waning. The ERIC

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[8] *ibid*, p. 131

[9] ibid, p. 4

database, investigated in 1998, indicated that the number of articles on, or referring to *Nation At Risk,* was 317 for the period between 1990 and 1997—an unexpectedly large volume for a report published a decade earlier. Examples from the popular press and academic literature additionally suggest how often the report is a point of reference in discussions of school reform five, ten, and fifteen years after its publication.:[11]

- On the 10th anniversary of its publication in 1993, Senator Edward Kennedy used the occasion to describe the 'fierce urgency of NOW,' for educational reform and proclaimed, "*The nation is at even greater risk.*"[12]
- The National Society for the Study of Education published an analysis of the report which suggests, "History will probably show that the National Commission on Excellence in Education's *A Nation At Risk* ranks among the most important educational reports of this century."

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[10] ANAR was published approximately concurrently with six other national-level assessments of American schools. ANAR, however, was the only report with specific federal sanction. Most students of recent reform credit these other reports as contributing to the dialog, but not instigating and catalyzing it in the ways in which ANAR apparently did. "The other reports that soon followed [ANAR] added to the momentum." (Holton, p. 19)

- [11] On the positive side, also in 1993, the National Association of Secondary School Principals produced Education for the New Century: Views From the Principal's Office, in which author Donald Gairey wrote that if Rip Van Winkle were to awaken today the only place he would feel comfortable would be school. He wrote that *A Nation At Risk*, "signaled the need for us to question our educational practices" from the ground up.
- Less positively, 1991, Chester Finn's impatient book, We Must Take Charge declared that in spite of *Nation At Risk's* influence, the nation was still "asleep at the wheel, and has lost its mind." Echoing Finn, in 1997, Diane Ravitch, resident conservative voice of the educational establishment and colleague of Finn's said: "The education reform movement that began in the early 1980s must be graded incomplete." (Diane Ravitch, Brookings Institution Newsletter, September, 1997, no. 23), p. 22.

Further references to ANAR are truly too numerous to mention.

[12] Senator Edward M. Kennedy, "*The Nation Is at Even Greater Risk Now,*" National Issues In Education, John F. Jennings, Editor (*Phi Delta Kappa*, 1993), pp. 19-20.

- In a recent, prominent review the last four decades of school reform for the governing board of the National Education Goals Panel, educational researcher and policy analyst Richard Elmore describes the kind of "seismic shifts" that have occurred in the school improvement and reform climate since the publication of the report. [13]

Within the reform literature currently, in fact, it is the unusual writer who does not in some way refer to *A Nation At Risk* in surveying the recent landscape.

The Usual Suspects. The standard explanations for the *A Nation At Risk's* impact are usually offered as follows:

- Most straightforwardly, the document acted as an uncommonly powerful focusing event by creating a rhetorical sense crisis or disaster. (**"Our once unchallenged preeminence…is being overtaken throughout the world…"** *ANAR, p. 5.*) This perception of impending catastrophe, "reinforce[d] some preexisting perception of [the] problem, focus[ing] attention on problem that was 'already in the back of people's minds.'" In order to be effective, focusing events confirm, "the magnitude the problem that everyone intuitively knows exists in some form."[14] Gerald Holton suggests that public interest in education was at a low in 1983; the report catalyzed it and *ANAR* rode the cresting wave with spectacular skill.

[13] Richard F. Elmore, "The National Education Goals Panel: Purposes, Progress and Prospects" (November, 1998)
[14] Kingdon, pp. 98, 91

- As has been noted by many, the imagery of the report is dark, dramatic, and foreboding. It symbolically links America's educational failure with a breach of national military security. (**"If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war"** *ANAR*, p. 5). These words fell on the ears of an American public already under the sway of Ronald Reagan's view of the USSR as "an evil empire," and his first-term enthusiasm for a strategic defense initiative in space. The ideology of the report fit the national mood of heightened concern about international competitiveness and national defense.

- The report roped together the economic interests of southern governors[15] and corporate leaders in the imperative of educational competitiveness. (**"The risk is not only that the Japanese make automobiles more efficiently…It is also that these developments signify a redistribution of trained capability throughout the globe."** *ANAR*, p. 6)

- The issue, after the public's profound visceral response became clear, was a politically attractive one for Reagan as he faced reelection in 1984.

[15] A December, 1997 conversation with Harvard Graduate School of Education faculty member Bob Schwartz confirmed the assertions of Lamar Alexander. "In 1980 I was governor of Tennessee. I recall the Democratic legislative leaders coming to my office to talk about their resolution creating a commission to look at our state's educational system…We agreed that it was time for a serious look at education." (Alexander, Lamar, *"What We Were Doing When We were Interrupted,"* National Issues In Education: The Past Is Prologue, John F. Jennings, Editor (Bloomington: Phi Delta Kappa International, 1993), p. 8-9

- Finally, in comparison to the work of most federal commissions, the report is inspiringly brief--a cool 36 pages. In this regard, committee members knew just what they were up to. They meant for the public to read the report, and they have.

While all of these arguments are strong explanations of the report's impact, weighed against the difficulties of sustaining interest in education among a notoriously impervious, inattentive public, to me alone they seem inadequate. Could it have been "luck only," as educational historian Patricia Albjerg Graham suggests,[16] which brought this report to such prominent national attention and caused it to become "the key topic at literally hundreds of conferences and institutes convened expressly to discuss it?"[17] Why the fervor of response to the document? And why the sustained, searing memory for the report among scholars, business leaders, and educational practitioners, those generally immune to the rhetoric of government literature? What else is at work in the collective political and cultural mind when considering the impact of *A Nation At Risk*, and our sometimes outraged responses to school "failure" in the subsequent school improvement dialog?

[16] In casual conversation, educational historian Patricia Albjerg Graham suggests that "A Nation At Risk's" impact was a matter "of luck." Amongst the many educational eports published during the 1983-84 period, she described ANAR as a lackluster, superficial effort. (Conversation 12/15/97, Harvard Graduate School of Education.)

[17] Gardner, William E., *"A Nation At Risk: Some Critical Comments,"* Journal of Teacher Education January-February, 1984, p. 13

A Nation At Risk As Ritualized Humiliation

> *"From the Puritan point of view, an event occurred at Plymouth in...1622 which [instructs as to the earliest colonists' mindset.] ...The colony was suffering a terrible drought, crops were despaired of; when the situation became desperate, the authorities appointed a day of humiliation. Whereupon rain fell.*
>
> *...The success of these early fasts left upon the New England mind an impression in which we may locate minute beginnings of adaptation to an American situation. ...Thus a ritual—or at least a ritualistic response to events—took shape. Whatever afflicted the colonies became the occasion for a day of humiliation; whatever rejoiced them evoked a day of thanksgiving."*[18]

Designed expressly to captivate the attention of an neglectful public, from its opening punch (**"Our nation is at risk."**) and throughout its searing, cautionary first paragraphs, *A Nation At Risk* glows with passion, longing, and condemnation for an America fallen from its highest mission. Hearken the sound of the watchman, ye sinners, it warns, or God will bring evil upon you:

> **"Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.** (*ANAR*, p. 5)

Who is to blame for our troubles?

> **"...As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves."** (*ANAR, p. 5*).

A Nation At Risk is a jeremiad, an attempt to make the rain fall in the diseased, parched land of education.

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[18] Miller, Perry, The New England Mind from Colony to Province, (Cambridge: Harvard, 1962), pp. 19-20

The Scaffold. What is a jeremiad? The form, familiar to Old Testament readers and anyone who has been scolded for failing to meet the highest standards of intellectual, moral and spiritual behavior, is of immutable psychological structure. As the portion of the quote from Jeremiah (at the opening of article) suggests, it sets out a vision of the idealized possible, (**"All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance…thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself." ANAR, p. 5)**. Then, using a stinging series of condemnations, describes the distance between the ideal and the actual, (**"We are raising a new generation of Americans that are scientifically and technologically illiterate…For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents." ANAR, p. 10)**. Most pointedly, it laments the time before the fall, a prelapsarian vision of the period when perfection was within our grasp.

As a genre, the jeremiad "foretells destruction because of the evil of a group, and is a severe expression of grief and complaint,"[19] and the *American* jeremiad,[20]--a specialized literary form reflecting the special optimism with which our culture is either blessed or cursed (depending on your point of view)—offers a final bonus: catharsis and redemption through hard work, sacrifice, and rededication to the mission. (**"Despite the obstacles and difficulties that inhibit the pursuit of superior educational attainment,**

[19] Holman, C. Hugh, A Handbook To Literature, 6e (New York: Macmillan, 1992)
[20] The American jeremiad is described in great detail in Sacvan Bercovitch's lively book, The American Jeremiad (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978.) Bercovitch describes how the American version of the jeremiad's great distinctiveness, "lies not in the vehemence of its complaint but in precisely the reverse. In explicit opposition to the traditional mode, it inverts the doctrine of vengeance into a promise of ultimate success…" (p. 33)

we are confident, with history as our guide, that we can meet our goal." ANAR, p. 33). [21] As the quoted passages suggest, *A Nation At Risk* perfectly follows the form of the American jeremiad, fixing our attention the imagined, golden possible of the future as we wallow in the dark, muddy failure of the now. Education, then is a metaphor for our salvation, and the roots of our chagrined, gut-wrenched responses to the report are sunk very deep in the American archetypal soil.

The Election Day Sermon. A repentant self-denunciation, the original 17th and 18th century American jeremiads were a response to the ideological and practical difficulties of ordering the American experience, and of making the spiritual and physical journey from European culture. Just as Americans were first to embrace the "radical" notion of common schooling—a significant departure from the traditions of Western European educational elitism--so too were Puritans filled with dreams of establishing a city on a hill, to be a beacon for the world.

The difficulties of undertaking such cultural revolutions were immense. From the Puritans' first journeys to America, John Winthrop, on board the *Arbella* crossing the Atlantic in 1630, "set forth the prospects of the infant theocracy in a provisional but

[21] For many the initial concepts in this paper I have relied on a lively article by Catherine Cornbleth and Esther E. Gottlieb, in which they lay out some of these ideas in *"Reform Discourse and Curriculum Reform" Educational Foundations,* Fall, 1989, pp. 63-77. In this article, however, the authors are interested in the rhetorical limitations of the form of the jeremiad, and point to the "constraints of old visions" and the assumptions the structures impose on curricular reform. I, obviously, focus more on the archetypal might and power of the form.

sweeping prophecy of doom,"[22] and warned of the consequences for a chosen people of straying from their sacred mission.[23]

> Winthrop proclaimed: *"If wee shall deale falsely with our god in this work wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world, wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of god and all professours for Gods sake; wee will shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause theire prayers to be turned to Cursses upon us, till wee be consumed out of the good land whether wee are goeing."*

Of course, Winthrop had good cause to be concerned about the souls of his charges. From the moment of *Arbella's* landing, the Puritans were in turmoil, at constant risk of being drawn from their errand into the wilderness by "carnal lures, the pull towards profits and pleasures, and the tendency to allow children to degenerate."[24] These offenses are punishable anywhere, but among those especially favored by God they were particularly shameful and momentous. "Should the emigrants [the Puritans] fall prey to such temptations, God would surely withdraw their 'special appointment,' weed them out, pluck them up, and cast them…out of his sight." [25]

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[22] Bercovitch, p. 3

[23] Winthrop proclaimed: *"If wee shall deale falsely with our god in this work wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world, wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of god and all professours for Gods sake; wee will shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause theire prayers to be turned to Cursses upon us, till wee be consumed out of the good land whether wee are goeing."*

[24] Bercovitch, p. 4
[25] *ibid*, p. 4

Thus the ritual of the election day sermon, cataloging a multitude of sins and warning of the dangers of misdirection, evolved in Puritan communities. Colonial historian Perry Miller describes the gathering of the 17th century fallen:

> *On annual days of election, in the spring, after officers were installed and oaths taken, before turning to business, the General Court regularly listened to a sermon which, [was] a review of recent afflictions. [M]inisters chosen for the occasion would try then to be their most impressive. [In these sermons they] addressed mankind not as being of a complicated psychology, but as creatures governed by a simple calculus. [Humans are] perniciously pursued for their sins; [and they are fallen from grace]. [Ministers would then enumerate] ...in as much detail as they had courage for, the provocations to vengeance, [and the] proposed a scheme of reformation."* [26]

Traveling forward three and a half centuries, the proposed scheme of reformation suggested by our own commission on excellence in *A Nation At Risk* is **"the urgent need for improvement" in education (ANAR, p. 23)**. Just as the Puritans might pour their soul sickness into their fast-day sermons, and emerge from such ceremonies with new strength and courage, as an educational community, and perhaps as a nation, we have used *A Nation At Risk* as an opportunity to cleanse our bosoms and to renew ourselves. The report's central themes, and even curiously, negative reactions to it, reaffirms our sacred and secular mission in education, and confirms that, in spite of everything, we are a common people striving towards a common goal.

The Report's Themes. As the jeremiadic form intends, we have been captivated by a few of the central messages of the report. A sense of Americans as a special, chosen people pervades *A Nation At Risk*. In it, the education of our children is not just about

[26] Miller, p. 29

"our [own] prosperity, security and civility…and our once unchallenged preeminence," in the world, but concerns **"our Nation as the preeminent country for generating the great ideas and material benefits for all of mankind."** As a nation, the report tells us, we are preeminent and to be saviors of the world.

But this is certainly not all. In spite of our divinity as a chosen people, *A Nation At Risk* warns, we have failed in our sacred mission. The report reflects the same simple calculus of sin as outlined in the 17th century jeremiadic election sermons. A nation which perniciously neglects educational excellence will be punished. Simply, it will fall from grace. (**"Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sign of the basic purposes of schooling…[and] history is not kind to idlers…America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure…It is no longer."** ANAR, p. 6)

Like the children of the Puritans who threaten to run wild, *A Nation At Risk* cautions of the consequences if we do not recommit to our historic mission: (**"For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents…***ANAR*, p. 11). Reminding readers of the sad vision of the spindly, undernourished plant which withers in the soil without producing seeds stronger than itself, without a radical redirection of priorities and a halt of its precipitous slide into mediocrity, America might literally fail to reproduce itself.

Finally, at the heart of the report and perhaps its gentlest message, is a fear of the loss of cohesion around our society's central visions and values, as idealized in the report.

This fear of atomization was terrifying to Puritan ministers in the 17th century, and it frightens us at the end of the 20th : **("What lies behind this emerging national sense of frustration can be described as both a dimming of personal expectations and a fear of losing a shared vision of America."** *ANAR*, p. 11-12). While Puritan governors and ministers called for rededication to rigid codes of personal and spiritual behavior among the elect, *A Nation At Risk* suggests that a cohesive, unified, productive America can only be achieved if "**education [is] ... at the top of the Nation's agenda."** (*ANAR*, pp. 7, 17-18). Then we can fling off our soul-sickness and frustration, and reunite in our sacred ideals and The Shared Dream:

> **"Our concern...goes well beyond matters such as industry and commerce. It also includes the intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people which knit together the very fabric of our society... A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture..."** (*ANAR*, p. 7)

This is education as national spiritual salvation.

With rededication to the effort of "excellence," and thorough hard work and sacrifice, we may yet overcome all obstacles because,

> **"We are the inheritors of a past that gives us every reason to believe that we will succeed...It is by our willingness to take up the challenge, and our resolve to see it through, that America's place in the world will be either secured or forfeited. Americans have succeeded before and so we shall again."** *ANAR*, pp. 34, 36).

A Nation At Risk weaves together several powerful strains of American identity in a jeremiadic conception of loss: of parental failure to reproduce strong seeds, the fear of lost cohesion in a diverse society, and the falling away from the mission of a chosen people. From the pulpit, and hearkening back to some of the country's most important

and earliest spiritual experiences, the authors of *A Nation At Risk* created an psyche-revealing document with reverberations far beyond what I think even the most ambitions writers of the report imagined.

Conclusion. Too often the subject of prosaic, literal analysis, Americans' current concerns about education are not grounded exclusively in the rational workings of economic cause and effect. We are a people intent on prospering, certainly, but we also harbor extravagant sociological dreams. Our hopes for education are often a public expressions of these private dreams. The Learning Society outlined in Section 5 of *A Nation At Risk* sounds not so much like a plan for educational reform as a reaffirmation of a shared vision, one that expresses that, "we are still in the middle of our journey…only half way to our goal—only halfway to a city upon a hill, a city in which we can all take pride."[27]

In *A Nation At Risk* the revival of our education system is the symbolic means through with we as a nation will be cleansed, our mission renewed, and our historic conception of ourselves as "the preeminent country…for all mankind," restored. The report is return to our archetypal cultural roots, to the myths which form us and continue to exercise profound sway over our national agendas, often unconsciously. In 1983, and in the long run of influence it has had subsequently, *A Nation at Risk* dramatically lengthened the shadow of the future of education by returning us—rhetorically—to the seventeenth century New England town square as we listen to the Election Day sermon. We are stirred, and we are ashamed.

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[27] (Robert F. Kennedy, 1965)